DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 291 080 CS 009 048

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TITLE Reading and Responding with Understanding, Part I: An Analysis of GCSE Exemplar Materials (1986-1987) for Understanding and Response.
INSTITUTION Oxford Univ., Eastleigh (England). Delegacy of Local Examinations.
PUB DATE 87
NOTE 39p.
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Educational Change; Foreign Countries; Letters (Correspondence); Literature; Newspapers; Reader Response; *Reading Achievement; *Reading Comprehension; Reading Materials; *Reading Processes; *Reading Tests; *Test Construction; Test Validity
IDENTIFIERS *Great Britain

ABSTRACT

As a response to the artificiality of the traditional reading comprehension test, this booklet provides alternative means of testing that are within the guidelines of the British National Criteria. Ideas for testing informative, persuasive, autobiographical, and literary materials are presented in the booklet--carefully chosen to provide material in a meaningful context, to consider reading processes, and to offer students an important role and purpose. For example, the booklet contains some tests that require students to read and write responses to advertisements and editorials that are of particular interest to teenagers, and thus calls into question the value of timed examinations as measures of reading with understanding. Recommended for the future is a coursework folder that will provide a more valid representation of students' achievements as readers--assuming teachers do not model themselves on nation-wide exams. (ARH)

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READING WITH UNDERSTANDING

Booklet 1.

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READING AND RESPONDING WITH UNDERSTANDING :

PART I

an analysis of GCSE Exemplar Materials (1986-7) for Understanding & Response.

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by

John Dixon
Leslie Stratta

1987

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Introduction

The Delegacy's Writing Development Group combines a range of interests.

Sandra Boreham's experience is in FE & Communication;

Lorraine Foreman-Peck researches into Response to Literature;

Liz Johnson's experience is in Tertiary College & Drama;

Dave Kessel, a senior moderator with the SEG, is especially interested in cross-curricular work;

Eric King has been a moderator for SREB;

Norman Munnery is especially interested in media;

Mike Preece is a chief moderator with the SEG;

John Dixon and Leslie Stratta do research into writing and reading.

This booklet is the outcome of this group's seminars throughout the year 1986-87 and has been written up on their behalf by John Dixon and Leslie Stratta.

* * * * *

SECTION A.

Everyday Purposes for Reading with Care

Let us imagine a small town and a day in its life: what kinds of occasions for reading (with care) might one expect to find? We'll start with what regularly comes through some of the letter-boxes first thing in the morning : letters from friends sharing experiences; letters from charities giving information and requesting help; persuasive letters offering a "service" you may want; agendas, fixture lists and other circulars from clubs, voluntary associations, or unions .... Moving on into the day, at the bus or railway station there may be timetables to consult or travel brochures and circulars to pick up, with advice about cheap fares, week-end holiday opportunities, excursions abroad ... At the newsagent's we'd expect to see people buying not only newspapers but specialist weeklies and magazines - some of them offering information, advice or encouragement, and appealing to a range of diverse interests (computers, do-it-yourself, cars, cooking, gardening ... The Economist, New Society, Radio Times, Spare Rib ... Women's Own). During the working day, many of the townspeople will have to read memos, specifications, reports, incoming orders, and a variety of other documents. Some will have to draw on advisory leaflets and booklets, produced by government (national or local) and many other agencies or trades. Throughout the day, in breaks and the lunch hour, people will be reading specific news items, some reporting events, thus interpreting them, offering opinions and moulding attitudes. Some items will involve genuine human dramas, others sensationalised gossip, no doubt.

In the evening there may be time to read longer feature articles on topics of the day - AIDS, child abuse, radioactive pollution, firearms, the latest political crisis, among many others.

So far much of this reading informs, advises, persuades or argues with the reader about people and things in the world. Thus, in turn, the reader may have to take note of what has been read and act upon it - including, perhaps, producing further written material for others to read with care. That is one dimension. But life isn't just getting things done. There should be room for the world of the imagination - for the mind at play. And this is why we'd expect to find some people reading novels and shorter stories, simply "for enjoyment"; imaginatively exploring new experiences, empathising with different characters, living for a time in a fictional world ... This is a second dimension, and equally important. (And we may act upon it, though in a different way, in our day-to-day understanding of our own life and that of others).

Alongside this daily range of reading, of course, we will observe most - perhaps all - of the people of our town drawing on the media, both television and radio, for many of the same purposes. For some people there is complex interweaving between print and the audio (visual); for many, television and radio are much more central, even omnipresent, outside working hours.

Whether voluntary or obligatory, all these different acts of attentive reading (with viewing and listening) arise in the course of everyday living. But there is another area of life to recall, where reading with care is central, and that is education. However practical the subject, it's likely that at some point books and print material will be referred to; equally, some subjects are unthinkable without a textual basis.

English is one of those subjects. But how well have traditional English Language "exercises" in "comprehension" related to reading with care in everyday life? In 1981 Barnes and Seed found, after detailed analysis of GCE/CSE Exam papers, that "the artificiality of the typical comprehension test is most striking" (1).

To summarise how artificial the traditional exercise had become, we would point to the following characteristics:

1. A passage is typically offered without context, and without any purpose for reading other than satisfying an examiner.
2. The formulaic questions focus attention on words and phrases selected by the examiner, not on the overall meaning of the passage and its potential significance for the reader.
3. Candidates are required to provide written answers to a set of such questions, not to use the ideas or message for any relevant purpose; their role is simply that of an examinee and totally alien to any of the everyday roles in which they will produce written responses to printed material. (It doesn't even relate to reading in other school subjects).

The widespread criticism of this tradition, and the recognition of everyday purposes for reading with understanding, offers a new challenge to GCSE examiners, as a close reading of the National Criteria demonstrates.

The National Criteria : assessment objectives

These criteria set out for teachers and examiners eight "inter-related and inter-dependent" objectives. All syllabuses "must provide opportunities for candidates to demonstrate their ability" to fulfil these eight. Let us focus attentively (!) on those that may affect reading and responding with understanding. What new goals do they set us?

In the broadest terms, students are expected not simply "to understand" material but to "convey" and "present" it to others. In other words, they have to use what they have read as a basis, to "communicate effectively and appropriately" to an "audience" or readership.

The criteria state explicitly that understanding will be concerned not only with "facts", but also with "ideas and opinions", "implicit meanings and attitudes". These will be studied "in reading material and in other media". Acting on that understanding will call for the ability to "evaluate" what has been read and viewed, to "select what is relevant to specific purposes", and to devise a suitable "order" in presenting it to others. Conveying what they have understood will require students to "show a sense of audience and an awareness of style", both "formal and informal".

So far we have been relating the objectives to what the criteria call "non-literary material". Clearly this includes a very broad range of possibilities : narrative reports, general information, persuasive documents, argument and discussion, to go no further. To deal adequately with such a range - as the criteria make explicit - students will need to "respond in a variety of ways to what is read". (And without recourse to course work folders, we doubt if this range and these complex objectives can actually be covered in assessment).

In addition, within the English syllabuses there is a second dimension to be considered : the ability of students to "enjoy and appreciate the reading of literature" and to "respond imaginatively to what they hear, read and experience in a variety of media". Although these Aims do relate directly to one objective 2.1.4. (that students "articulate experience and express what is felt and what is imagined"), it seems to us that they could benefit from some filling out by reference to the English Literature objectives, especially the students' ability to "communicate a sensitive and informed personal response to what is read".

So much for the criteria laid down. They may not be perfect in their present form, but in our view the model of the uses of language which informs them represents a major step forward. How far, we must ask, have the Boards been able to meet this challenge in

their initial exemplar materials? Before we answer that question, however, we must first consider how best to "order" and "present" the material for our readers!

Mapping the Field

When we confronted the exemplars from all six boards, our first problem was its range and variety. Some boards included visual material - images, diagrams, tabulations - others confined themselves to text. One board even included an audio-tape. So the mode of communication was one variable we had to bear in mind.

When we focussed on the printed material, there were further obvious differences to consider. Almost all boards had included a narrative passage, though in some this was a piece of imaginative literature, in others a documentary report. A few boards used a passage of generalised prose, a factually-based piece of informative writing, for example. Thus a second variable to consider was the contrast between narrative and generalisation (or the "level of abstraction" as it has been called).

A third variable has already been hinted at. An imaginary story was going to call for different kinds of understandings from a factual (eye-witness) report. The one might be called "imaginative" or "poetic", the other "informative". (And to make matters more complex, there may be passages where the two functions of language overlap). Similarly, in one piece of generalised prose we noted that the major function was "persuasive" rather than "informative". Again a different process of understanding was required.

There were equally complex differences when we came to analyse the demands of the visual material. One offered a simplified but still concrete image; a second a rather schemetized map; a third a linear route map; and a fourth a tabulation of hotels, prices and travel times. Manifestly, different kinds of "reading" and

interpretation were called for.

This was the beginning of our map, then - but only the beginning. There were still two major elements to consider : the reading processes that were called for and the role and purposes offered the student in producing a written "response" for a particular readership. Rather than treat these elements in abstraction from the material, we shall discuss and analyse these as we look at each exemplar.

. . . .

SECTION B.

The Exemplar Materials

Our group is grateful to all six Boards for sending their exemplar materials for us to study. We are well aware, from our SEA representatives alone, of the pressures that the Boards were under to produce this material on time. What's more, our own group's recent experiences in re-designing "questions" on poetry has left us in no doubt as to the importance of detailed and lengthy discussion, whenever radical changes are being attempted. If there are flaws in the exemplars, then this should not be surprising - given the schedule demanded and the complexity of the task. The aims we set ourselves, therefore, in scrutinizing the material were threefold:

(a) to recognise positive achievements in meeting the National Criteria;

(b) to suggest, where we could, extensions and developments of these achievements;

(c) where necessary to point to places where, in our view, the criteria were not met and "artificiality" still predominated.

In this booklet we have decided to group the material according to the main purpose or function of the language/visuals : in broad terms, we shall start with informative accounts and material, move on to exemplars with a persuasive or argumentative purpose, and conclude with autobiographical and literary passages.

Of course, in selecting materials for a booklet we ourselves have had to face constraints of space. Within these we have tried to give a flavour of the material itself, but necessarily we have been restricted to extracts : readers who want to follow up further details will no doubt apply to the Boards direct.

Understanding and Response to Informative Material

Language with an informative purpose surrounds us in our everyday lives. We have only to open a newspaper - well, some newspapers! - or to listen to/watch a news broadcast and we are told what is happening, or has just happened, in the world. Of course, what we hear isn't simple "information" : every report will be shot through with social attitudes and ideological assumptions. This is something teachers and examiners need to take into account when studying reports, documentary features, eye witness statements, testimony in court, and the like.

Of course there are other kinds of topic : informative booklets or articles on mechanical equipment, on how to make or mend things, on how to use your word-processor, on what to look for or where to find products you need - language about such things stands a chance of being more "factual" or "objective". Even then, as soon as we get into guidance or advice, there will be room for different opinions : which word-processor to buy, which plants are best for indoors, how best to make or do something, and so on, all will involve personal choices and judgements - even in something as factual as a "Which?" magazine.

So this is a very rich field for teachers and examiners to draw on, with the possibility of quite a sophisticated range of different kinds of "understanding" to develop.

* * * * *

Six exemplars fell into this category:

a) two used multiple reports (on a ship running aground; a road accident);

b) two used maps with associated text (about a marathon run; a railway outing);

c) one used a set of schematized visual images (on designs for the Channel tunnel);

d) one used a tabulation (of flights and hotel prices).

The range of different forms (or modes of communication) is encouraging and appropriate).

a) Multiple Reports

The Welsh board chose a dramatic news item, where the "Prince Ivanhoe", a pleasure steamer, came to grief off the Welsh coast. It is an excellent example of the kind of local event that most of us would switch on to as it came up on the news. The students are given two reports : a word-for-word account from a television news programme, only two hours after the incident, and a front-page item in the following day's newspaper. Each is roughly 500 words, but it seems worth giving a longish extract from both.

BBC Wales Today 5.55pm Monday

.... Well, the 'Prince Ivanhoe' had set out on a holiday cruise along the Mumbles and the Gower coast. The weather was fine. The ship is thirty years old. The voyage was a routine trip that she had made before. She's solidly built with a double-skinned bottom for extra safety. Two months ago she went aground in the Avon Gorge and she stayed marooned for three days before she could be refloated. Well, this time it seems that she struck an underwater obstruction which holed her hull. Water rushed in. At one time the captain lost the use of the ship's twin diesel engines, but power came back in time to beach the vessel one hundred yards off shore.

Mrs. Anne Gill, a passenger, was asked if there had been panic on board. "Well, there seemed to be

quite a number of panics, but not too much. There were quite a number of babies crying but ... you know ... people weren't rushing, but they seemed to be moving pretty fast. I got a bit scared downstairs so I said, 'Let's go upstairs'. So we went upstairs. By then - oh, we started moving, that's right - he managed to get us off the reef and went, you know, towards Port Eynon beach, where he beached the boat we were on ... or the ship ... he actually drove into the beach where it wasn't ... you know, so steep. The bottom deck was, well, the engine room was completely flooded". One of the passengers, Mr. Jack Stubbs, described what happened.

"Well, we heard the bump and we felt it, but we thought the engine just sort of ... just sort of missed a beat or something, but in fact it had hit the bottom, and holed the ship and the captain stopped the ship, and then told us that there was no need to panic or anything, that he was going to turn around but in fact it started making water quite fast and I went down below to have a look and one of the engineers was covered in oil almost up to his waist, and we realized then it was quite serious and the ship was going down quite fast".

Newspaper Report Tuesday

A mini-Armada of small boats ferried 452 day-trippers to safety yesterday after their pleasure steamer was holed and beached off Gower during a Bristol Channel cruise. Local fishing and pleasure boats rushed to help the 1000 tons diesel vessel 'Prince Ivanhoe' which was packed with families from South Wales, the West country and the Midlands.

The 'Ivanhoe' had been beached 400 yards off-shore after striking a "submerged object" off

Port Eynon point'.

Terrified passengers, many wearing life-jackets, scrambled down gangplanks and were lowered to rescue craft as water swept through the 'Prince Ivanhoe's' below-decks lounge. Three helicopters hovered above, supervising the rescue, and the Mumbles and Tenby lifeboats towed some of the smaller rescue boats to shore.

The 'Ivanhoe's' own lifeboats were also used during the operation. All the passengers were landed safely within an hour of the vessel being beached.

The passengers, many of them children, were taken soaking wet from the beach to recover at nearby hotels.

The 30-year old former Sea-Link ferry, 'Prince Ivanhoe' started the cruise at Penarth yesterday morning and the ship went to Barry, Minehead and Mumbles and was making a tour of the Gower coast.

It sailed into Port Eynon and was making its way out past the point at 3.45 p.m. when passengers heard a rending sound and the ship shuddered twice. It is believed that a local pilot was on board and the tide was near its lowest ebb. The ship came to an abrupt halt and the engines stopped. It was 20 minutes before they restarted and pulled her clear. The captain then sailed his ship into the centre of the bay and ran it on to the beach because it was taking in water.

Let us start from the reading processes called for here. It seems to us there is a rich variety, even in what may seem at first sight fairly straightforward passages. As a start, which elements do the examiners help candidates to focus on?

Part of the interest lies in what happens to the people:- What kind of experience did they go through? - How did they behave? Here the examiners are very helpful:

- "to what extent do you think that the evidence points to panic ... after the "Prince Ivanhoe" was holed?"
- "Mrs. Anne Gill was interviewed ... Read carefully what she said and the way she spoke. How does she show what the state of her mind was?"

Another part lies in how near we are getting to the truth of what happened, when we compare the various informants. Here again the examiners prompt the student to consider many useful points:

- the accuracy of the numbers on board
- the clarity of our impression of what holed the ship
- the details of the rescue operations.

It's appropriate that only after raising such questions do they ask another, more evaluative question:

- "What is your judgement of the Captain?"

Equally there is the possibility now of reaching an overall judgement on the reporting itself, given some understanding of the constraints on the reporters and production teams. Although they do help the candidate to consider the effects of time constraints ("What evidence is there ... that the BBC ... editors were working so fast that they had not time to plan their presentation...?"), the examiners are content with the piecemeal judgements above, on accuracy and clarity.

Finally, there is an opportunity to consider uses of language in a more analytic fashion; here the examiners ask:

> "What evidence shows that [Mr. Jack Stubb's interview] is spoken English rather than written English?"

While it may be interesting to itemise differences between spoken and written, we suggest that it is important to consider meaning and intention - the effects that the presenters are trying to achieve, and why. (But, of course, this would require a video-tape, not merely a transcript).

In terms of reading processes, then, the examiners are evidently calling for quite complex understanding. Where we should like to suggest development is in the evaluation of the reporters and their intentions, and this could be strengthened by a more analytic attention to the relationships between language use, meaning and intent.

How about the role and purpose offered the students, though? Interesting though these questions are they still trap the candidate into the role of the examinee - answering solely for the benefit of the examiner (who already knows)! How much more valid would the response have been if candidates could finally have prepared a report for suitable readers (classmates? - the BBC team? - readers of the local newspaper?), using the understandings prompted by those questions. Although this would be simulated, it is the kind of serious undertaking we want students to get experience of, in preparation for roles in their future lives.

* * * * *

The Northern Ireland board had an imaginative idea, for a similar kind of exemplar. Their material offers four eye-witness accounts of a road accident. Then the student is told: "Put yourself in the place of a policeman who has to write a factual report on what happened and who was responsible. Base the report on your interpretation of the information given by the witnesses". In terms of role and purpose this seems excellent (though we wonder if the policeman would be

called on to decide responsibility?).

However, though the reading process is certainly complex, requiring a good deal of cross-reference, and interpretation or judgements of individual perceptions, each "account" is on the superficial side. Here is the first, for example:

> *Mr. John Black, aged 27 - Passer-by:*
>
> *"The kid had no chance. The car came speeding up the inside lane, he was just trying to avoid the queue in the other lane. Next thing I knew was that the girl was lying across the bonnet of the Escort. You should have heard the screech of brakes".*

We find it difficult to believe that this is real, rather than fabricated - and greatly simplified - testimony. (How different it is from Mrs. Gill!). Nevertheless, we would like to see more exemplars on these lines, given greater realism. If this is agreed, we would suggest that more sophisticated judgements about responsibility may be needed so that students would have to analyse, for example, where evidence was disputed and where there was consensus (suggesting reasons why this might be so), before proceeding to apportion responsibility. Naturally, this model could be applied to many other social events, besides accidents.

* * * * *

(b) - (d) Information Visuals plus Text

We want to treat as a group the four exemplars incorporating informative visuals.

There is an imaginative potential here, our seminar believes, which is never quite realised. Information in our modern society is certainly being given in visuals, such as schematised images, maps or tabulations, alongside text. So the Midland, Northern Ireland & Southern Boards deserve credit for recognising this in their exemplars.

Furthermore, the Southern Board has tried to set up a genuine role and purpose for the student as reader. For example:

a) "Imagine that you are a reporter on a local weekly paper. Write an article for the page of your paper featuring "Day Trips" describing your day out from Marylebone... [and] pointing out the special attractions.."

b) "Write a letter from the [Marathon] Race Director to this year's entrants selecting from the passage whatever information you find appropriate".

These contrast favourably with the rather arbitrary facts and comparisons demanded of the students by the other boards. Why, the intelligent students might ask, tell the Northern Ireland examiner "What is twenty-four miles from the town of Corfu?", or "What can be found about a mile from the town of San Stefano?" Or why tell the Midland examiner about the "differences and the similarities" - nothing else - between the three proposals for the Channel Tunnel? We recognise that it is important to extract factual information from tabulations and diagrams, but only information that is "relevant to specific purposes" (as the National Criteria point out).

However, what worried our group over these four exemplars were the difficulties that examiners obviously got themselves into. When there are situations where technical and factual interests predominate (and human

interests seem to be less important), it is more easy for English examiners to go astray and overload their students with informative material (often of a limited nature), or to set up arbitrary, even crude questions, which can be predominantly technocratic.

The strength of the English teacher, surely, is to keep human concerns in focus and to make factual information serve them.

* * * *

Understanding and Response to Persuasive/Argumentative Material

Every day we encounter many different kinds of persuasion, discussion and argument. Advertisers try to persuade us to buy their products; charities and voluntary associations appeal for our help. Members of committees, clubs, unions and political parties try to work out a common line of action and convince others of its validity.

Persuasion is a two-edged weapon. So there is always the danger that it is carried on egocentrically, solely in the interests of the persuader, not the persuaded. Unscrupulous marketing, the clever tricks of political propaganda, with the covert sliding in of false assumptions and premises, these are part of our common experience. And in the last two or three decades television has become a dangerous new force, in its ability to shape people's attitudes and values - with its army of backroom researchers well versed in depth psychology in the creation of brilliant images juxtaposed with language, in the skilful use of rhetorical devices : an entire industry controlled by a tiny minority.

However, the effort to convince, to discuss what's right, and to argue for it, to make well-grounded and rational choices does need to be based on an appeal to better feelings, in the better interests of the person or the community as a whole.

There are very important forms of moral, social and political understanding to be learned, and English teachers and examiners are naturally to be found at the centre of such work.

* * * * *

Surprisingly, only three exemplars fall into this category - and in two cases we have to stretch a point to include them:

a) one uses a set of extracts from guide books, two of which use language emotively;

b) one uses an advertisement for an educational book club;

c) one uses a letter of protest to be replied to.

The narrowness of this sample, and the uses it was put to, is disappointing. Perhaps the boards should reconsider this position.

a) Guide Book Extracts : St. Michael's Mount

Once again there was an imaginative idea to start from, this time from the Midland board. The three extracts involved quite different purposes and uses of language, with a range from factual information to a romantic appeal. So at one moment the candidate is concerned with mundane matters (such as the time the guided tours leave, the prices of admission, and the telephone number for special educational visits), and the next with "a unique blend of nature, romance and architecture ... all smiling welcome ... regarded as sacred ...".

The examiner's difficulty, as our group saw it, lay in defining a suitable role and purpose for the student. Two were offered:

> 1. *The extracts you have just read are all from guide books.*
>
> *Suppose you are writing an account of St. Michael's Mount suitable for some of your friends to read, and wish to include a paragraph that describes the history of the Mount. Write the paragraph in up to about 150 words.*
>
> 2. *Your school Parent-Teacher Association has organised a trip to Cornwall for one week*

in June and you have been asked to recommend places to visit. Using the information given in the extracts write a report for the Association's Committee in favour of a visit to the Mount and suggest how a day there might be organised.

These are two very different tasks, in terms of reading process. To judge by the marking guidelines, the first task simply calls on the students to abstract out, and order, eight "historical details but not necessarily with all the dates". So this appears to fulfil the National Criteria objective to "select what is relevant" - an important form of understanding. But the second half of the objective says "relevant to specific purposes" : is that list of historical facts really "suitable for some of your friends to read", we wonder? Is this a real role, or once again an examiner's exercise?

The second task does ask for persuasive uses of language "in favour of a visit". But, again, our seminar group wondered how many 16 year-olds would feel confident in the role of organising a day for a P.I.A.

Incidentally - and we shall be returning to this - the students were given only 45 minutes to read and digest the three extracts and to produce both the written documents (the second of which involves much searching to find enough relevant activities to fill out a whole day).

b) Advertisement for Book Club

Manifestly it is important for students to assess advertising material, as part of the English syllabus, and credit must go to Northern Ireland for being the only Board to offer such an exemplar. In the event they chose an advertisement inviting parents to join a

club offering a monthly choice of "Books for Children" - an important service, if well done.

The task proposed was as follows:

> 3. *Look carefully at the attached advertisement. You should look particularly at the picture, the headline and the other words. Write about the advertisement making clear how you think it makes its appeal to the public.*
>
> *Give reasons why you think it might or might not be effective.*

Thus, the rubric directs students to three important elements : "the picture, the headline and the other words". These cues to reading process are important - but our seminar group believed they could profitably be extended. Consider, in the headline for example : the type-face used, the choice of names, the form of appeal ... In the main body of the text, for example, how is the cost to parents dealt with in the following two paragraphs?

> *Books for Children are offering all 8 of the Oakapple stories for just £1.60 (plus postage). That's only 20p a book, saving you £14 on the publishers' price - as an introduction to a book club that's unique.*
>
> *Books for Children will offer your children a planned, comprehensive introduction to the world of books. We aim to help you choose the best children's books from the hundreds published each month - as well as saving you up to 50% on the publishers' prices.*

In general we believe that students will need more detailed guidelines or prompts, especially when there is such a body of text as in this case.

Our second main point concerns the last sentence of the rubric : "Give reasons why you think it might be effective". The first question is : Who are students giving reasons to? - what exactly is their role? And this is related to our second question : "Effective" for whom? - for the advertiser, or the parent? Are we simply concerned with the selling of the product, or do we want students to evaluate how it is being sold? The latter is a central question, which the Board seems to have overlooked.

c) A Letter of Protest

We were very disappointed to find that only one Board - Northern Ireland - had tackled understanding and response to written discussion and argument. (The other exception was the Midland Board, which set a question in its Aural Exam asking students to give the "opinions" of one of the speakers and to say where they would agree or disagree). This serious omission links up in our minds with the paucity of written discussion and argument in course work folders - a topic discussed in an earlier booklet (2).

Yet, as the N. Ireland examiners showed, a very straightforward and adaptable format is available. Here is their question:

> *The following letter appeared in the 'Belfast Telegraph'. Read it and using the correct letter format write a letter to the Editor, Belfast Telegraph, Royal Avenue, Belfast BT1 1EB, giving your response to the points raised.*
>
> *Thugs run the streets*
>
> *I am writing to inform you of events which occurred in Belfast City Centre on Saturday last. I hope that by bringing these matters to public attention something will be done to ensure that they do not occur again.*

I brought my four year old daughter with me into town to do some shopping. As soon as we got off the bus we became aware of crowds of young people, both boys and girls of about 16 years old standing around corners and in the doorways of some shops. It was clear that some were in gangs of one kind or another by their dress, hairstyles and general behaviour. I was shocked when suddenly they began to run at each other; my daughter was knocked to the ground and, naturally, became very frightened by this stampede. She became quite hysterical and I had to call a policeman to assist us in getting back on to the bus.

This situation cannot be allowed to continued. Decent people cannot come into town while these thugs run the street. The authorities will have to do something to keep young people off the streets. It is clear that young people of today lack common sense, maturity and consideration for others. Young people of my generation did not behave like this, possibly because their parents had control over them. If parents cannot control their children then it is up to the Government, the City Council and the Police. As a rate payer I demand that something should be done.

(Mrs) Joan White.

We note first that there is a very clear role, directly related to everyday life. And a letter about young people's behaviour is very likely to stimulate students to respond, giving them a realistic sense of purpose.

Our only qualifications concern the guidance which we feel students will need. The letter-writer tells the story in paragraph two of an incident that ought to enlist the readers' sympathies. However, in paragraph three she becomes rather emotionally irrational in her assertions about "young people of today", compared with

"my generation". Our seminar group could imagine many students who would find it difficult to stay cool under such provocation!

Would it be helpful, with material of this kind, if we tried to offer students clearer guidelines about the need to answer such letters rationally, while bearing in mind that certain feelings and attitudes may be quite understandable?

. . . .

Understanding and Response to Autobiographical and Imaginary Stories

Up to this point we have been looking at attempts radically to transform what used to be called "comprehension". In this section we turn to something new and different - response to literature. Within GCS this was traditionally dealt with in English Literature papers. But the National Criteria are quite clear that the new subject, English, should "develop the ability of students to enjoy and appreciate the reading of literature" and to "understand and respond imaginatively" to it.

The challenge to the examiners, then, was to find ways of eliciting appreciation, understanding and imaginative response, not in the frame of specialist English Literature, but in a general English course. It is not an easy task - since effectively the whole age group at 16 are going to be candidates. What makes it even more demanding in the initial phases are the serious, even crass, mistakes that have become traditional in Literature examining, and which our group has discussed in detail in two previous booklets (3).

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There were as many as nine exemplars in this category:

- one used autobiographical material (two episodes);
- the remainder used either complete imaginary stories or extracts.

We intend to treat the whole set of exemplars under three headings:

a) How far does the language introducing the passage and talking about it help the student achieve an imaginative engagement with the characters and their experiences?

b) How suitable are the passages for the majority of sixteen year-olds, given that they must read them in silence and with strict time limits?

c) How helpful are the questions as guidelines to enable students to "articulate and express" what they have understood, felt and imagined?

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a) The Language Introducing and Framing the Passage

In the classroom, teachers frequently prepare for a reading by establishing a context. Somehow or other this practice seems to have been lost in the examination tradition. All the more welcome, then, to see two of the Boards trying to use language to draw the student into the experience. Here is the first, from the Southern Group (the better of the two they offer):

From Intimate Relations by Jacqui Durrell.

Jacqui Durrell shares with her husband, Gerald Durrell, a love of animals. In the following episode she gives an account of an Emperor Tamarin monkey. This pet is particularly troublesome and has a bad influence on others in their care!

There is a sympathetic understanding here, both of the passage and of the student. The language is accessible and direct; the touch of wry humour is an excellent preparation for what will follow.

The second example comes from London & East Anglia : it introduces two passages, one from Adrian Mole's Diary, the other describing a girl's visit to an Old Ladies' Home:

Read the following passages. Both give accounts of teenagers meeting some old people. As you read,

you should consider the following:

each person's behaviour, feelings and attitudes towards the old people;

the old people's feelings about them;

and the ways in which things are described.

You will be asked questions on these points in Part II.

You have fifteen minutes' reading time. You may make notes on details of the passages in your answer book.

The emphasis in this introduction is rather different. The context is given briefly, almost perfunctorily : "Both give accounts of teenagers meeting some old people". On the other hand it tries to direct the readers towards "people's behaviour, feeling and attitudes" and "the way things are described" - important aspects of both passages. As well as making clear the organisational procedures, it also gives some practical suggestions about making notes on details, in the course of reading.

Our only further reservation is that there is an unnecessary formality about some of the language, "You should consider the following", for example. Would something like "try to keep in mind - to imagine as vividly as you can" be preferable?

The remaining boards offer nothing at all by way of introduction, or else something along the lines of:

"Read the following extracts and then answer ALL the questions which follow".

A surprisingly peremptory tone to introduce an experience of enjoyment and appreciation!

b) Suitability of the Passages

This is where the major effort seems to have gone, in designing the exemplars; there is a genuine attempt to engage sixteen year-olds in experiences they can recognise, empathise with, and learn something in doing so. There is a strong, raw school experience, with interesting undertones, from Northern Ireland; a more delicate but graphic movement in young adolescence from the Northern Association; a glimpse of the grave, even terrible responsibility in a vet's work, from Southern; a dense, symbolic evocation of dependence and release, of a boy and his mother, from the Midland Group ... and so on.

We do have one major reservation, however. Three of the Boards give two extracts, to be read one after the other, before the student comes to the questions. This seems to our group, an unnecessary burden in a timed examination, likely to inhibit or prevent a full response to either passage.

c) Questions as Guidelines to the Articulation of Response

Despite the bad traditions of the past, the boards have manifestly tried to engage the student imaginatively, and in a variety of ways. Here is some of the range:

- Imagine you are another pupil in M's class. Write your impression of the atmosphere in the classroom during the incident ...
- How do you think J regarded his mother and his relationship with her?
- Why do you think the snowdrops are important to the story ...?
- What do you learn ... about the feelings and attitudes of the various humans to the animals concerned?

- Carrying the girl to the road has a great effect on S. In your own words describe how he feels while he is doing this.

A minor point needs re-emphasising here : there are no grounds in theory or practice for treating the reader as a passive consumer rather than an active agent constructing an imaginary experience from the linguistic signs in the text. Thus for "what impressions are given" read "what are your impressions"; for "what evidence is there" read "what evidence, if any, do you find"; "for what reasons is J so keen to get money" read "from what you understand, why is J ...", and so on.

So much for the positive side. However, it must be said that some of the sets of questions caused our group grave concern. It seems that some Boards have not made up their minds that it is literary response, not some sort of factual comprehension, they are after. They seem to have fallen between two stools - the passages are treated in part as if they conveyed information (of an instrumental kind), and in part as imaginary experiences. How can students be expected to reconcile the differences in tone between two totally conflicting views of literature? On the one hand there are the kinds of imaginative questions we have quoted. On the other, there are these kinds of questions:

- Write down five points about M's physical appearance.
- Give a brief outline of the progress of B's business career.
- In your own words, explain what you understand by the following.
- From what you have read here, what seems to be the usual view tourists from abroad have of England ... as they begin their visit?

Finally, strong as some of the sets of questions are, in their current form they demand anything from five to ten separate short replies, with the constant stress on the student to attend to the examiners' requirements as well as the text. Our group believes - on the basis of practical experiments - that students as a whole would do better if they were encouraged to use a sequence of questions as "guidelines", helping them to build up a piece of continuous prose. This offers students - including less able writers - the opportunity to articulate with increasing fluency and complexity what they have actually gained from their reading, with the tactful support of the teacher-examiner.

We owe our own understanding of this approach to the Cambridge Plain Texts group, and our own experiments testing the method across an ability range are fully documented in our last booklet, "Examining Poetry - the Need for Change".

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The Implications of Examination Constraints

As our group worked through this material, and began to stand back from it, they raised fundamental questions about the value of timed exams as instruments for assessing reading with understanding. The constraints on the examiners - and thus on the students - are far-reaching and seriously reduce the hope that the central intent of the GCSE, to assess positive achievements at each grade level, can actually be fulfilled. Thus:

a) Context.

Unlike the classroom teacher, the examiner has no opportunity to build a context, where a passage (or tape) is going to form part of a wider enquiry. Text cannot be placed within drama, interviews, discussion, presentations and other activities that can give it richer meaning.

b) Harnessing interests.

No single passage is equally interesting or relevant to all candidates; for some it is bound to appear a chore. By contrast, in a classroom where choice is given, individual students can be offered opportunities to search out texts they want - and need - to read with great care.

c) Enjoyment & Appreciation.

In particular, examiners cannot be expected to find a single imaginative narrative that all students will find enjoyable to read silently, in the exam context. Nor, after a hurried reading, are a set of examiners' "questions" likely to elicit personal appreciation - especially if they are treated as requests to score points (detailed in the margin), rather than prompts to help students to articulate.

d) Range of kind & difficulty.

The most advanced students at 16 are capable of

reading sophisticated texts that even their teachers would find demanding. It is impossible to set such work in an exam because many other students would be outfaced. Thus there are bound to be constraints on the range of difficulty in exam material. Similarly, an examiner has only time to cover one or at the most two of the immense range of purposes for which we read and respond with understanding. Not all students are equally good across the range, thus there is an inevitable arbitrariness in what they are faced with in the exam.

e) Simulated/real roles.

A timed exam inevitably places students in a simulated situation for reading with understanding and putting it to some use. Simulations have their value, (4) but principally when they are closely related to reading (and responding) for real purposes and readerships. It is classroom teachers who can make opportunities for such real situations to occur.

f) Drafting and criticism.

Few of us would publish work in response to our reading without finding a friendly critic and allowing time for re-drafting. Normally, an examiner has to rule out both processes.

g) Time.

Some people read slowly, some fast. A timed exam can take no notice of these differences. Indeed all of the above - the building of a context, the harnessing of interests, the provision for choice of material and range, the induction into a simulation, and the process of drafting - have to be sliced back, if not obliterated.

Critical awareness of this kind has led us to realise how much students (and Boards) will depend on a course-work folder for a valid representation of their positive achievements as readers - let alone their abilities as viewers and listeners.

However, course-work folders will only display students' real potential if the Boards encourage teachers not to model themselves on exams, but to exploit the additional opportunities they enjoy.

Let us close with an example. Dave Kessel, one of our group, was recently approached by two of his Fourth Years who wanted to enter a science competition, submitting a script for a television programme on Joseph Priestley. After 'consultation' with Dave and their science teachers they read a series of texts about Priestley's life and work, decided on a structure for their product; selected appropriate material from their reading; studied and mastered the conventions of script-writing; conceived a visual interpretation, with a sequence of visuals to write alongside the (oral) text; considered appropriateness to a television audience - and finally produced a 26-page typed version for submission.

No timed exam could ever accommodate this kind of learning.

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(4) See for example one of our previous SREB booklets Writing Within Simulations (1984).

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THE UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD DELEGACY OF LOCAL EXAMINATIONS
WRITING DEVELOPMENT GROUP

This group

- meets regularly to discuss a variety of uses of writing
- is currently working on how to optimise what students can learn from writing in the course of group or individual enterprises
- wants to set up a dialogue with other teachers of English and Communications in schools and FE colleges.

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If you find these ideas useful, we would be very pleased to have feedback from you and your students. We'd be equally glad to hear about problems, additions and modifications you would like to suggest.

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